

Periodization: a Defence

“Dividing history into periods is never—I repeat, never—a neutral or innocent act.” Jacques Le Goff, *Why Must we Divide History into Periods*, p. 17.

“There is always something awkward in the organization of epochs”. Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*, p. 154.

In the title of his final book, the late medievalist Jacques Le Goff asked the question “Why must we divide history into periods”? The question was almost—but not quite—rhetorical. Le Goff pointed out the long-running dispute over the boundaries between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and the lack of clarity around them. Though brief, the book is insightful and, in the end, not nearly as provocative as its title suggests. For Le Goff concedes that periodization of some sort is inevitable to make sense of a past that would otherwise consist of an endless series of events something like the vision of Arthur Danto’s hypothetical Ideal Chronicler who is capable of seeing, and recording, everything that has ever occurred, from a Boethian, atemporal position (an ability that Danto himself saw as not especially useful to the work of writing history).¹ In a way, Le Goff thereby answers his own question in the affirmative, before we are very far into his text. “Periodization remains an indispensable principle for the historian, even if the globalization of culture and the decentering of the West we witness today have caused its legitimacy to be challenged.” He even makes the case more positively further on: “Thanks to periodization, both the manner in which human history is organized, and the manner in which it changes over time, over the long term, is becoming clearer.”² Le Goff is far from being the only scholar to have wrestled with the problem of periodization for his and other eras of history. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of articles, book chapters, and even entire books on the subject.³ The publication in which this paper appears is devoted to aspects of the same question that Le

¹ An ability that, as PAUL A. ROTH notes, lacks a point of focus without which “either nothing appears—the blooming, buzzing confusion—or God-knows-what looms before us, like the photo pressed too close for one to view. Total information gives us less than we need to know”: ROTH: *The Philosophical Structure of Historical Explanation*, Evanston, IL 2020, 32. For the original discussion see ARTHUR C. DANTO: *Analytical Philosophy of History*, Cambridge 1965, 149 ff.

² J. LE GOFF: *Faut-il vraiment découper l’histoire en tranches?*, Paris 2014, trans M.B. DEBEVOISE as *Must we Divide History into Periods?*, New York 2015, 58, 116. The “vraiment” in the French title is significantly elided in translation, and “tranches” can be translated differently than into “periods”, but the translation captures Le Goff’s literal if not figurative meaning.

³ For instance: DIETRICH GERHARD: *Periodization in European History*, *American Historical Review* 61.4 (1956), 900-913; EMILY APTER, et al: *Untiming the Nineteenth Century. Temporality and Periodization*, *PMLA* 124.1 (2009), 273-288; DAVID BLACKBOURN: “The Horologe of Time”. *Periodization in History*, *PMLA* 127.2 (2012), 301-307; ROBERT S. BAKER, *History and Periodization*, *Clio* 26.2 (1997), 135-41; LAWRENCE BESSERMAN: *The Challenge of Periodization. Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, in BESSERMAN (Ed.), *The Challenge of Periodization. Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, New York and London 1996, 3-17; A. GANGATHARAN: *The Problem of Periodization in History*, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 69 (2008), 862-871; MARGARET DICKIE, JOYCE W. WARREN: *Challenging Boundaries. Gender and Periodization*, Athens, GA, 2000; KRISTEN POOLE, OWEN WILLIAMS (Ed.): *Early Modern Histories of Time. The Periodizations of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth Century England*, Philadelphia, 2019; JENNIFER SUMMIT, DAVID WALLACE: *Rethinking Periodization*, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37.3 (2007), 447-51; PETER N. STEARNS: *Periodization in World History Teaching. Identifying the Big Changes*, *The History Teacher* 20.4 (1987) 561-580. Periodization is also a standard entry in most reference works on historiography. For some examples see: Z.S. SCHIFFMAN: *Periodization as Historical Problem*, in D.R. WOOLF (Ed.): *A Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*, New York 1998, 2: 702-3;

Goff asked, and with much the same chronological focus, namely how *medieval* was the Renaissance, and how *early modern* were the late Middle Ages.

What is periodization? The Japanese scholar Masayuki Sato has concisely defined it as “a form of historiological cognition proposed by the human mind for making the past intelligible and meaningful by dividing the collective past into compartments along time.”⁴ Robert Berkhofer, borrowing Hayden White’s notion of emplotment, defines it as primarily a rhetorical operation that serves two functions, that of defining divisions of time according to accepted conventions and, secondarily, the organization of narrative discourse about the past (such as historical books and articles) such that a text reflects in its internal organization (parts, chapters, sections) the defined periodization and its subdivisions. But if it is a rhetorical operation, it is one that has a tendency to self-reify such that dates and the spans between them “represent more to historians than just their temporal duration or chronological location.”⁵ And not just historians or other humanists: periodicity is crucial in the social sciences, in finance,⁶ and—in much bigger chunks such as eons, epochs, and eras—in scientific disciplines from physics to paleontology, biology, climate science, and geology.

Do periods, so defined, possess characteristics that distinguish one from another—a *Zeitgeist* for instance, or what some medieval thinkers called a *qualitas temporum*? The dominant antirealist or at least irrealist assumptions of contemporary theorists, in agreement with Berkhofer, White, and, from a slightly different perspective, the philosopher Leon J. Goldstein,⁷ would answer emphatically that they do not, and that such qualities as unity and coherence are entirely bestowed upon the past by the historian, making periods into little more than longer and bigger versions of Bakhtinian chronotopes, divisions of space-time authorially created and prescriptive of the behaviour of the long dead actors who dwelt therein.⁸ Yet this was not always the sense of the past and its

LUDMILLA JORDANOVA: *History in Practice*, 3rd edn, London 2019, 145-66; JEAN LEDUC: *Période, périodisation*, in C. DELACROIX, F. DOSSE, P. GARCIA, N. OFFENSTADT (Ed.): *Historiographies. Concepts et débats*, Paris 2010, vol. 2, pp. 830-38; J. LEDUC: *Les historiens et le temps*, Paris 1999; K. POMIAN: *L’ordre du temps*, Paris 1984; and the essays collected in *Périodes. La construction du temps historique* (Actes du 5e colloque d’Histoire au présent), Paris, 1999.

⁴ MASAYUKI SATO: *Time, Chronology, and Periodization in History*, *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 2nd edn, 24, 2015, 409-14. From a literary perspective, F.E. Sparshott offered a six-fold definition of periodization in an early number of *New Literary History* half a century ago, which for reasons of space I shall not summarize here. SPARSHOTT: *Notes on the Articulation of Time*, *New Literary History* 1.2 (1970), *A Symposium on Periods*, 311-34.

⁵ ROBERT BERKHOFFER: *Beyond the Great Story. History as Text and Discourse*, Cambridge, MA and London 1997, 129-30.

⁶ On which see the excellent recent book by AMIN SAMMAN: *History in Financial Times*, Stanford, CA, 2019.

⁷ LEON J. GOLDSTEIN: *Historical Knowing*, Austin, TX and London, 1976

⁸ See for instance PAUL A. ROTH: *The Past, History and Theory* 51, 2012, 313-39; M-I MUDROVIC: *Time, History, and Philosophy of History*, *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, 8, 2014, 1-26. The literature on Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope is considerable and need not be listed here, but see recently JAMES LAWSON: *Chronotope, Story, and Historical Geography. Mikhail Bakhtin and the Space-Time of Narratives*, *Antipode*, 43.2, 2011, 384-412; IVANA MARKOVÁ and ADELINA NOVAES: *Chronotopes, Culture and Psychology* 26.1, 2020, 117-38.

divisions. Thinkers from late antiquity through Bede, Otto of Freising, Joachim of Fiore, and even the arch-nominalist William of Ockham certainly thought that time and its divisions possessed a reality, bestowed by God, well beyond authorial whim. Scholastics created the *aevum* as a concept to denote a temporal space somewhere in between the *saeculum* and *aeternitas*,⁹ and the word was eventually redeployed to describe historical segments such as the *medium aevum*, or Middle Age. The Renaissance humanists who created that division saw such ages (though for them, the word “period” denoted a stop or end and not yet a duration) as an indispensable context without which words and the events they denoted could not be properly understood; Vico built on this with his idea of a “mode of the time” which bestowed coherence and harmony on the events that occur in society at a given stage in its development; and an understanding of divisible, sequential, and distinctive chunks of time was a crucial underpinning of historicism in the nineteenth century, in particular the Rankean injunction to judge past societies and states according to the values of their own time and place.¹⁰ René Wellek, writing as late as 1940, seems to have thought so too. While he decried the deference of literary historians to the tyranny of historians’ decades, centuries and even reigns, and conceded that periods were not “metaphorical essences”, Wellek also believed that they were much more than “verbal labels” and that a single period could be understand as a “system” of aesthetic norms providing a “regulative” function.¹¹

Popular understandings and cinematic representations of periods are ubiquitous. Stereotypes of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance have become so familiar in our culture that they can themselves be the object of satire. Consider, for instance, the now half-century-old Woody Allen line, from the medieval court sequence of his film *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex but were Afraid to Ask*: “I must think of something quickly or before you know it, the Renaissance will be here and we’ll all be painting.” Generations of historians (of art, politics, philosophy, music, society, the economy, etc) have wrestled with this since at least Jacob Burckhardt, whose characterization of the Renaissance as a distinctive period stood in tension with his dislike for the sort of era-changing, disruptive events of his own lifetime that augured the arrival of an unwelcome stage of modernity (a judgment in which he was joined by his younger colleague and sometime correspondent Friedrich Nietzsche). In a sense the Renaissance, while in important ways lying separate and apart from the medieval that preceded it,

⁹ FRANK KERMODE: Epilogue, in *Sense of an Ending* (revised edn), Oxford 2000, 71-74.

¹⁰ For most of this sentence, I’m indebted to AMOS FUNKENSTEIN’s still indispensable essay, *Periodization and Self-Understanding in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, *Medievalia et Humanistica*, new series no 5, 3-23.

¹¹ RENÉ WELLEK: *Periods and Movements in Literary History*, in *English Institute Annual 1940*, New York 1941, 73-93, esp. p. 93.

remained for Burckhardt part of an overarching European cultural unity, more safely viewed as a culmination of classical and Christian values than as a decisive, clinamenic “swerve” toward the modern.¹²

This specific periodization problem remained of interest to Burckhardt’s pupil and chosen successor in the chair of art history at Basel, Heinrich Wölfflin, and to subsequent art historians who (working within a tradition first laid down by Vasari in the sixteenth century) were especially attuned, perhaps even more than historians in other spheres, to definitions of period according to chronological time, stylistic characteristics, and duration.¹³ Wölfflin’s near-exact contemporary, the Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga was a partial sceptic, pulled in two directions. In some passages of his magnum opus *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* (*Autumntide of the Middle Ages*), perplexed by the rigidity of any medieval/Renaissance division, Huizinga pointed to the meaninglessness of periodic labels—by which he seems to have meant simply to reject firm chronological boundaries—while elsewhere insisting almost dogmatically on the necessity of periods, albeit defined according to other criteria than events. Indeed, as Graeme Small suggests in the new centenary English translation of *Autumntide*, the book signaled that “Our concept of periodization—a fundamental issue in general history—was in need of thorough revision.”¹⁴ Huizinga’s aesthetic vision of the Middle Ages—the northern decline mirroring Burckhardt’s strikingly similar portrait of the southern “rebirth” is notably devoid of markers or limiting events that might constitute the “frame” for his picture.¹⁵ There are memorable tableaux (such as the assassination of Duke Jean sans Peur), but no key crises, caesurae, or even iconic transitional events.¹⁶ There is no fall of Constantinople, no Bosworth Field, nor even a northern Petrarch scaling a Burgundian Mount Ventoux, to signal passage from medieval to early modern. The book’s changes and mutations

¹² JAMES R. MARTIN, *The Theory of Storms*. Jacob Burckhardt and the Concept of Historical Crisis, *Journal of European Studies* 40.4 (2010-12), 307-27; JÖRN RÜSEN: Jacob Burckhardt. Political Standpoint and Historical Insight on the Border of Postmodernism, *History and Theory* 24.3 (1985), 235-46. For the “swerve”, as an idea (first posited in Lucretius’ poem *De Rerum Natura*, see STEPHEN GREENBLATT: *The Swerve. how the World Became Modern*, New York 2011.

¹³ WÖLFFLIN’s French contemporary Henri Focillon being another prominent example. See PETER DENT: *Time and the Image. Art at an Epochal Threshold*, in R. HUTTON (Ed.): *Medieval or Early Modern. The Value of a Traditional Historical Division*, Newcastle upon Tyne 2015, 146-72.

¹⁴ GRAEME SMALL: Epilogue. from *Herfsttij to Autumntide*, in JOHAN HUIZINGA: *Autumntide of the Middle Ages*, ed. G. SMALL, A. VAN DER LEM; trans. D. WEBB, Leiden 2019, 552.

¹⁵ For which image see HARRY JANSSEN: *Rethinking Burckhardt and Huizinga. A Transformation of Temporal Images*, *Storia della Storiografia* 70.2 (2016), 95-112, at p. 99.

¹⁶ On “crisis” as a key element in the Western sense of time (and specifically its origins in Christian thought signifying a rupture to end of Chronos-time and movement to the time of Kairos), see most recently FRANÇOIS HARTOG: *Chronos, Kairos, Krisis. The Genesis of Western Time*, *History and Theory* 60.3 (2021), 425-39, and responses by ETHAN KLEINBERG, DIPESH CHAKRABARTY and others in the same issue. Martin Sabrow has suggested that “caesurae” in the sense of extreme ruptures bringing an end to one period and the start of another are especially common in the writing of contemporary history (and that the political events of 1989-90 marked so strong a caesura as to justify the creation of Contemporary History (upper case intentional) as a distinct subdiscipline in Germany; but if this is so one assumes that it derives from the relative immediacy of the caesura event and a lack of distance that bestows perspective: MARTIN SABROW: *The German Historians’ Debate about the Upheavals of 1989*, in HARRIET JONES, KJELL ÖSTBERG, NICO RANDERAAD eds, *Contemporary History on Trial. Europe since 1989 and the Role of the Expert Historian*, Manchester 2007, 174-92, p. 174.

undulate and stretch time but do not break it; yet Huizinga's account is also much more than a depressing sequence of "one damn thing after another". Rather, it is a wonderful example of something the Renaissance historian Randolph Starn, in an illuminating essay, terms "normal turbulence", change and modulation without rupture or lurch.¹⁷ They Huizinga even avoids turning some of his key non-political figures--Ockeghem, Van Eyck, Brunelleschi, Commines and Rabelais, whose births might seem to provide a convenient *initio aevii*, into anything more than Janus-faced artists marking significant departures from their predecessors while still indebted to prior centuries of practice and convention. Huizinga's Middle Ages is thus *waning* and autumnal, but seemingly never fully *waned*, its Cheshire Cat fading redolent of words written half a century later by the Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez whose description of a decaying fictional town could just as well describe the Europe of Van Eyck and Monstrelet: "the last that remained of a past whose annihilation had not taken place because it was still in a process of annihilation, consuming itself from within, ending at every moment but never ending its ending."¹⁸ In comparison with authors of *Kulturgeschichte* or the history of any visual or auditory art form (for whom as Meyer Schapiro once wrote, "periodizing must be vague in its boundaries"), the authors of political and military history would seem to have it a bit easier. They are gifted not only with date-specific events as their principal contents, but also with reigns (the Elizabethan period; Meiji Japan), dynasties (the Achaemenids, the Tang, or the Mughals) and, of course, centuries and decades as ready-made, fully-recyclable packaging for that content. Yet rigidity of boundaries can create different problems, and while a decade or century may provide a convenient narrative unit, it cuts off many developments in mid-stream.¹⁹ It may reasonably be asked if the fixation in Western historiography on crises, traumatic and violent "turning-point" events such as wars, revolutions and battles, which provide tempting starting and stopping points for our accounts of the past, are not a by-product of a global historical culture that remains highly Eurocentric in its practices and fixated on political units, especially the nation-state.²⁰

There have been many more discussions and debates, even if labels have changed, early modern now being more in fashion than Renaissance since it seems to embrace other forms of history than the artistic and literary, but it

¹⁷ RANDOLPH STARN: *History without Periods. Deliverance and Dilemma*, Litteraria Pragensia, vol 17 no. 34, 131-52, at p. 141. On the "normal" and its rupturing of temporality as itself a modern construction, see DANIEL WOOLF: *Getting Back to Normal: on Normativity in History and Historiography*, *History and Theory* 60.3, 2021, 469-512.

¹⁸ GABRIEL GARCÍA MARQUÉZ: *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. GREGORY RABASSA, New York 1970, 403-404.

¹⁹ On the tendency to mix and match of different sorts of markers or attributes, see MEYER SCHAPIRO, H.W. JANSON and E.H. GOMBRICH: *Criteria of Periodization in the History of European Art*, *New Literary History*, 1.2 (1970), 113-25, quotation at p.113; see also GEORGE BOAS: *Historical Periods*, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 11.3 (1953), 248-254.

²⁰ A point made in passing in SARAH MAZA: *Thinking about History*, Chicago, 2017, 174.

is no more immune from definitional instability.²¹ It is not the only long-running periodization dispute, and as ever-newer sub-fields and sub-subfields of history split off through intradisciplinary fission, even the most stable-seeming periodizations are likely to fall under renewed scrutiny.²² And whenever one “problematizes” (or reproblematises) a subject from the past,²³ especially a transformation or movement such as that from medieval to early modern, periodic markers of beginning and end create inconvenient obstacles for the historian, stumbling blocks virtually goading the historian to try to move them. Thus, to give only one example, the boundary between antiquity and the Middle Ages is just as fraught as that from the latter to the Renaissance.²⁴ As Le Goff reminds us, worries over the “when” of that transition induced German historians to develop the concept of the late antique or *Spätantike*, a transitional sub-period construed as a hybrid, Christian-classical phase distinguishable alike from a preceding purely classical era and the subsequent early Middle Ages of fully established Christianity and nascent Islam.²⁵ In essence, this served both as a period in its own right and as a kind of *Sattelzeit* analogous to the later one located by Reinhart Koselleck between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, in that example a kind of cultural rope bridge across the political chasm of the French Revolution.²⁶ At the most recent, contemporary, edge of human history, literary theorists and cultural critics continue to wrestle with the definition of postmodernism, and whether it differs much from the modernism whence it emerged and against which it supposedly reacted, just as the latter represented a movement away from nineteenth-century realism. It would appear, then, as Fredric Jameson’s first of four “theses

²¹ Tackled in many works, but most recently by JUSTUS NIPPERDEY, *Die Terminologie von Epochen. Überlegungen am Beispiel Frühe Neuzeit/early modern*, *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte*, 38, 2015, 170-85.

MERRY WIESNER-HANKS: *What is Early Modern History?* London 2021, esp. 1-11.

²² Rob Boddice notes this point in connection with one such new field, the history of emotions: BODDICE: *The History of Emotions*, Manchester 2018, 206.

²³ ROBERT CASTEL: “Problematization as a Mode of Reading History, in JAN GOLDSTEIN, ed. *Foucault and the Writing of History*, Oxford and Cambridge, MA 1994, 237-52, at p. 239.

²⁴ On late ancient/medieval periodization see IAN MORRIS: *Periodization and the Heroes. Inventing a Dark Age*, in MARK GOLDEN and PETER TOOHEY (Ed.): *Inventing Ancient Culture. Historicism, Periodization, and the Ancient World*, London 1997, 97-131. As Morris points out, even the action of periodizing is subject to historical sequencing—periodizing of periodizing which tells us as more about the priorities of different eras in dividing their own pasts than about the pasts themselves.

²⁵ A fact, Arabists have noted, that has been useful in integrating Islam into wider history: KONRAD HIRSCHLER, SARAH BOWEN SAVANT: *Introduction. What is in a Period?*, *Der Islam* 91.1, 2014, 6-19.

²⁶ Perhaps most famously in REINHART KOSELLECK: *Future’s Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. K. TRIBE Cambridge, MA, 1985; see also KOSELLECK: *Time and History*, trans. K. BEHNKE, in KOSELLECK: *The Practice of Conceptual History. Time History, Spacing Concepts*, Stanford, CA 2002, 100-114; KOSELLECK: *The Eighteenth Century and the Beginning of Modernity*, trans. T.S. PRESNER, *ibid.*, 154-69. See also HELGE JORDHEIM: *Against Periodization. Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities, History and Theory* 51.2 (2012), 151-171; I concur with Lorenz, *Times*, 125 they are a ‘changin’ that one cannot place Koselleck on the side of “anti-periodization.” For a recent exploration of multiple temporalities, or atemporalities, embodied in art and artifacts during the Renaissance, see ALEXANDER NAGEL, CHRISTOPHER S. WOOD: *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York 2010. The 2017 CHRISTOPHER NOLAN film, *Dunkirk*, provides a cinematic exploration of multiple, overlapping temporalities with its parallel stories covering an hour, a day, and a week in the 1940 British evacuation operation.

of modernity” holds, we cannot *not* periodize.²⁷ Starn makes the point in a slightly different and more melancholic way—that even as we try to escape periodization we become hopelessly enmeshed in its coils.²⁸ To misquote Morris Zapp, a central character in David Lodge’s hilarious academic satire *Small World*, “every de-periodizing is a new periodizing.”

I concur with both Jameson and Starn, though I think the reasons for the inescapability of periodization are more complex, and perhaps even biological, than either allows. There is good evidence in neuroscience and genetics for a sense of duration—without which we could have no concept of periods—being hard-wired into our DNA. Geneticists have identified several genes that govern circadian rhythm in fruit flies, with the names “Clock”, “Cycle”, “Timeless” and even “Period”; several of these even have mammalian counterparts.²⁹ But whether because of biology or not, humans have organized time into periods of one sort or another since antiquity, even if the primary purpose was originally agricultural, calendrical and administrative rather than historical. As for the human *experience* of time, which is not quite the same thing, philosophers, historians and other humanists have attended to that virtually since St Augustine, and to the ways in which we perceive its divisions: Karl Jaspers, inventor of the notion of an ancient “axial age”, also wrote of a post-Renaissance “epochal consciousness”, of an age of progress (and, beginning with Rousseau, severe criticism of the values of that age, later echoed by Nietzsche); most recently, Dipesh Chakrabarty and others have promoted the idea of an age of the Anthropocene, and François Hartog has spoken of successive “regimes of historicity.”³⁰

Perhaps we conceive of historical periods on a grand scale because we sense them instinctively in our own lives. Our minds conceive of time and temporal periods using metaphors that are nearly invariably derived from space (“I haven’t seen her for a *long* time”; “there will be a *short* intermission”). We navigate the world temporally and spatially hundreds of times per day, in recalling our past, negotiating our present, and planning our future. Our

²⁷ FREDRIC JAMESON: *A Singular Modernity. Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, New York 2002, 29 (italics mine), apparently modifying his position in an earlier work, *The Political Unconscious*, London, Methuen, 1981, p. 27 where he warned against periodization’s “facile totalization”, which despite some potential benefits could be “fatally reductive”. A century before Jameson’s later remark, Benedetto Croce made a similar comment at greater length: “The periodization of history is subject to the same criticism [as the choice of facts]. To think history is certainly to divide it into periods, because thought is organism, dialectic, drama, and as such has its periods, its beginning, its middle, and its end, and all the other ideal pauses that a drama implies and demands. . . . It has sometimes been said that every periodization has a ‘relative’ value. But we must say ‘both relative and absolute,’ like all thought, it being understood that the periodization is intrinsic to thought and determined by the determination of thought.” CROCE: *Theory and History of Historiography*, trans. D. AINSLIE, London 1921 112-13.

²⁸ STARN, *History without Periods*, 143, eloquently calls this the “Laocoön effect”.

²⁹ DEAN BUONOMANO: *Your Brain is a Time Machine. The Neuroscience and Physics of Time*, New York 2017, 45-46; CARLO ROVELLI: *The Order of Time*, Harmondsworth 2019.

³⁰ KARL JASPERS: *Origin of the Epochal Consciousness*, in his *Man in the Modern Age*, trans. E. AND C. PAUL, London 1933, 4-16; DIPESH CHAKRABARTY: *The Climate of History. Four Theses*, *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009), 197-222; FRANÇOIS HARTOG: *Regimes of Historicity*, trans. S. BROWN, New York 2015.

understanding of our own lives, as Kierkegaard famously observed, is retroactive, and none of us considers the past of his or her own life without some sense of both period and place. The literary critic Frank Kermode remarked that “to make sense of our lives from where we are, as it were, stranded in the middle, we need fictions of beginnings and fictions of ends, fictions which unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning.”³¹ In other words, and to link Kermode to Koselleck and Bakhtin, we organize the space of our experience and the horizon of our futures into personalized chronotopes. For someone who has spent their entire life in the same town or village, that sense may be linked to a particular series of houses, or to the arrival or disappearance of new buildings, or simply to different phases of family-raising (“when the children were young”). Those who have traveled more will link phases of their lives to cities or countries. I have spent nearly my entire life in my adopted country of Canada, and within that I have my “Winnipeg period”, my Halifax period, my Oxford years, and my three different periods, split across 5 decades, from age 17 to the present, of living in or near the city of Kingston, Ontario. Unsurprisingly, these periods are also tied to phases of education or career. We also punctuate autobiographical periods, retroactively perceiving transitions, either abrupt or smooth, in marriages and divorces, deaths of family members, and personal experiences of trauma. These introspective exercises, heavily coloured by memory’s distortions as well as its “terrible pounce”, as Virginia Woolf put it in *The Waves*, delineate periods, their starts and finishes, phases entirely created by ourselves either by imagining a common defining feature that retrospectively lends each stage of life a degree of homogeneity, but just as often constitutes it in distinction to the periods that came before and after. For historians, especially those writing about pasts through which they themselves have lived—a professional variant of that phenomenological experience which Husserl called *Zeiterlebnisse*--it may even be impossible to separate an autobiographical sense of periodicity from one’s treatment of continuities, gaps and shifts in the historical world.³² Winston Churchill’s “sense of distinct periods in history, as well as in his own life,” for instance, “communicates a conscious grasp of the historical logic that impels his narrative order,” one recent author observes.³³

Understanding of the human capacity to draw, fix, and move temporal boundaries has been complicated in recent years by a renewed interest in temporality (or more commonly, plural “temporalities”) as a psychological and

³¹ KERMODE: Epilogue, in *Sense of an Ending* (revised edn), p. 190.

³² EDMUND HUSSERL: *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, ed. MARTIN HEIDEGGER, trans. J.S. CHURCHILL, Bloomington, IN 1964, repr 2019, p. 22.

³³ MARK E. BLUM: *Cognition and Temporality. The Genesis of Historical Thought in Perception and Reasoning*, New York 2019, 131. Though one recalls JEAN-PAUL SARTRE’s warning against conflating the personal experience of time, and duration, with historicity: *Being and Nothingness*, trans. HAZEL E. BARNES, New York 1994 [first published 1956], 158.

phenomenological experience rather than an objective measure,³⁴ and in alternative ways in which time can be “broken up”, or perhaps even puréed, almost to the extent that it may seem not to matter much to the historian’s craft.³⁵ Accompanying this has been an effort to rethink the notion of historical time altogether, and to suggest that we no longer think of time in a conventional past-present-future order; the “historicist chronotype” which leaves the past *in* the past has arguably been dissolving since at least the First World War.³⁶ There has been a growing acceptance of the notion that it is entirely possible for individuals to live in and through different types of time simultaneously, and in one sense this has always been so—calendars have long reflected the overlap between sacred and profane, *kairos* and *chronos*, political-institutional and personal temporalities. Recent decades, however, marked by a heightened perception of “pasts that will not pass” (doubly strange during years of elongated presents such as we endure in the suspended abnormality of Covid), have made us much more conscious of this point. And we actually *do* live in different periods contemporaneously: we are all simultaneously living through the period of a pandemic *and* of pronounced global warming *and* of a resurgent China and Russia, to say nothing of our own individualized life-periods. Our psychological sense of periodicity is often defined as much by emotional reactions³⁷—grief, nostalgia, joy—as by rational thought, evidence, or a clinically detached analysis of a historical period’s characteristics (consider the continued nostalgia for the “Lost Cause” of the American confederacy in certain pockets of contemporary America). Though now thickly overlaid by the conceptual apparatus of philosophers from Kant and Hegel, through McTaggart, Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre, to Ricoeur and (David)

³⁴ MATTHEW CHAMPION: A Fuller History of Temporalities, Past and Present, no. 243 (May 2019), 255-66; SUSAN S. FRIEDMAN: Alternatives to Periodization. *Literary History, Modernism, and the ‘New’ Temporalities*, *Modern Language Quarterly* 80.4 (2019), 379-402.

³⁵ For a recent set of essays on this subject see CHRIS LORENZ and BERBER BEVERNAGE (Ed.): *Breaking up Time. Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future*, Göttingen 2013. In addition see ALEXANDRA LIANERI: *The Western Time of Ancient History*, Cambridge 2011; VYVYAN EVANS: *The Structure of Time. Language, Meaning and Temporal Cognition*, Philadelphia 2003; ALEIDA ASSMANN: *Is Time out of Joint? On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime*, Trans. Sarah Clift, Ithaca, NY 2020; ZOLTÁN BOLDIZSÁR SIMON: *History In Times Of Unprecedented Change. A Theory For The 21st Century*, London 2019. Some of these authors, including Assmann and Lorenz, build on anthropological critiques to suggest that there is in fact no “ontological basis” for the differentiation between past, present and future (given for instance some Pacific peoples location of their future in their past as noted by Marshall Sahlins) and that temporal order is entirely a cultural construction. I am not fully persuaded of this (not least because it’s not clear to me how we could actually establish or falsify it) but as Lorenz suggests the study of “historical time” as specific phenomenon is relatively young: CHRIS LORENZ, ‘The Times they are A-Changin’. *On Time, Space and Periodization in History*, in MARIO CARRETERO, STEFAN BERGER, MARIA GREVER (Eds), *Palgrave Handbook of Research in Historical Culture and Education*, London 2017, 109-31, at p. 112.

³⁶ See especially the discussion in MAREK TAMM, LAURENT OLIVIER: Introduction: Rethinking Historical Time, in their (eds) *Rethinking Historical Time. New Approaches to Presentism*, London 2019, p. 4; LUCIEN HÖLSCHER: *Mysteries of Historical Order. Ruptures, Simultaneity and the Relationship of the Past, the Present and the Future*, in LORENZ and BEVERNAGE: *Breaking up Time*, 134-51.

³⁷ “Hardly any text evoking a glorious past, calling for a reawakening and rejuvenation, or sounding the clarion call for revolution fails to mention emotions: hope, despair, pride, honor, and shame most central among them.” MARGRIT PERNAU: *Emotions and Temporalities (Cambridge Elements on Histories of Emotions and the Senses)*, Cambridge 2021, 10.

Carr, the fundamental insight behind current understandings of ambiguous and multiple temporalities and non-discrete periods is not a new one to either historians or philosophers.³⁸ Late antiquity and the Middle Ages understood the overlapping and paralleling of parallel time-schemes, even if one oft-mentioned feature of historiographical modernity, the concept of anachronism, awaited the work of philologists such as Lorenzo Valla (who had the idea of anachronism but not the term) and early modern chronologers such as Joseph Scaliger (who had both) a thousand years later. Apart from the scholastic *aevum* mentioned above, what, in the end, was Augustine's heavenly city but a place of eternal non-time, a counter-temporality to the times of the material and secular world, themselves sorted in different ways according to regnal years, years since the birth of Christ, and years *ab orbe condito*, to say nothing of schemes such as the Four World Monarchies and the Joachimite Three Ages? And what, also, was Boethius' *nunc stans* if not a way of explaining that while humans experienced the passing of days, years and ages as a linear flow, God saw all time simultaneously? Virtually any attempt at parallel chronology from Isidore of Seville and Bede through Scaliger and Isaac Newton to Joseph Priestley recognized the arbitrariness of periods—when they acknowledged them at all—in their comparative, synchronistic timelines.³⁹

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Let's return to Johan Huizinga who himself pointed out the overlapping of periods, though without fully exploring the idea. Focusing on some of the same themes for which Burckhardt once expressed a preference, those precisely “on the frontier between the Middle Ages and modern times”,⁴⁰ Huizinga memorably anticipated Fredric Jameson's point, observing the overlapping and meshing of the medieval and the Renaissance, and the over-stretched elasticity of both. “Far back in the Middle Ages, forms and movements were detected that already seemed to bear the stamp of the Renaissance, and in order to encompass those phenomena too, the concept of renaissance was stretched until it had lost all its elasticity.” The opposite, he continued, was also true, as a great deal that might be called “medieval” can be found in authors such as Ariosto, Rabelais, and Marguerite de Navarre. “And yet”, Huizinga writes, immediately qualifying his own argument against periods, “we cannot do without the contrast: for us, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance have become terms in which we taste the essence of an era as so clearly

³⁸ An excellent sampling of philosophical positions on time can be found in CHARLES M. SHEROVER (Ed.): *The Human Experience of Time. the Development of its Philosophic Meaning*, Evanston, IL 1975.

³⁹ For early modern chronology see ANTHONY GRAFTON: *Joseph Scaliger. A Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, vol. 2, *Historical Chronology*, Oxford 1993; DANIEL ROSENBERG and ANTHONY GRAFTON: *Cartographies of Time. A History of the Timeline*, New York 2010. Synchronism is, interestingly, unmentioned in the otherwise illuminating essay ACHIM LANDWEHR and TOBIAS WINNERLING: *Chronisms. On the Past and Future of the Relations of Times*, *Rethinking History* 23.4, 435-55.

⁴⁰ JACOB BURCKHARDT: *Letters of Jacob Burckhardt*, ed. and trans. ALEXANDER DRU, Indianapolis 2001, 130 (BURCKHARDT to BERNHARD KUGLER, 30 March 1870).

different, just as we distinguish an apple from a strawberry, even though it is almost impossible to describe the difference.”⁴¹ This synesthetic image, a recurrent feature of Huizinga’s writings, is powerful, and suggests that there is something more at work than the arbitrary imposition of chronological time—as if a period were like a type of wine that any half-trained oenophile could identify by taste, or a piece of music instantly recognized as not only *from* a particular era, but actually embodying that era.⁴²

Chateaubriand, writing in the wake of the French Revolution, had evinced a comparable theory, substituting for the sensory and aesthetic the intellectual and quasi-theistic, asserting that “In all historical periods, there is a presiding spirit”.⁴³ Hegel had similar opinions, though for him, as Karl Löwith noted, “the history of the world [was] a history B.C. and A.D. not incidentally or conventionally but essentially.”⁴⁴ Other commentators have taken the opposite view and de-reified periods, denying them any existence outside the perceiving historical mind. The Victorian historian E.A. Freeman posited a “unity” to all history (in his case based on a continuity of racial traits) that made periods redundant, though he could not resist simply creating an alternative schema to the one he found wanting in contemporary historical education.⁴⁵ W.A. Green argued in the 1990s that periodization serves a classificatory function, that it is essentially “a morphological exercise.” Green adopts a scientific analogy. “As biologists classify living organisms according to their structure and form, so too historians classify bygone eras. For biologists, the objects of their classification are tangible. For historians, they are not.”⁴⁶ Physicists similarly remind us that periods of even the smallest size—nanoseconds for instance—are concepts that *relate to* but are not *identical with* nor *inherent in* nature.⁴⁷ For historians, the problems are ones of permeability, arbitrariness, and teleology—

⁴¹ HUIZINGA: *Autumntide*, 413.

⁴² WILLEM OTTERSPEER: *Reading Huizinga*, Amsterdam 2010, 155-65. This synesthetic sense of period emerges in other near-contemporary European historians: Frances Nethercott discusses the early twentieth-century Russian “excursionist” scholar I.M. Grevs of whom his student Nikolai Antisferov wrote, “Every age has its aroma, its own particular ‘sound,’ a sort of ‘couleur temporelle’ just as we would speak of a ‘couleur locale’.” FRANCES NETHERCOTT: *Writing History in Late Imperial Russia. Scholarship and the Literary Canon*, London and New York 2020, 136.

⁴³ FRANÇOIS-RENÉ DE CHATEAUBRIAND: *Memoirs from beyond the grave*, trans. A. ANDRIESSE, New York 2018, Book 5. ch. 1, p. 183.

⁴⁴ KARL LÖWITH: *Meaning in History*, Chicago 1949, 57.

⁴⁵ ODED Y. STEINBERG: *The Unity of History and Periods? The Unique Historical Periodization of E.A. Freeman*, *Modern Intellectual History*, 15.3 (2018), 651–679.

⁴⁶ W.A. GREEN: *Periodization in European and World History*, *Journal of World History*, Spring, 1992, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring, 1992), 13-53. See also Green’s comment elsewhere: “Periodization is both the product and the begetter of theory. The organizing principles upon which we write history, the priorities we assign to various aspects of human endeavor, and the theories of change we adopt to explain the historical process: all are represented in periodization. Once firmly established, periodization exerts formidable, often subliminal, influence on the refinement and elaboration of theory.” W.A. GREEN: *Periodizing World History, History and Theory* 34.2 (1995), 99-111.

⁴⁷ PATRICE F. DASSONVILLE: *The Invention of Time and Space. Origins, Definitions, Nature, Properties*, Cham, Switzerland 2017, 83. Dassonville generalizes this point to cover history itself which he defines as “conceptual rather than phenomenal.” It is not clear to me, however, that any modern historian would think otherwise. In any case, the question is not whether periods have some sort of ontological status but rather whether as a mental construct they are avoidable or not.

simpler to understand but no more readily solved, not least because our phenomena are neither experimentally replicable nor directly observable. Moreover, they are not neat and tidy. In packing up our bits of history, we are forced to use suitcases that however soft-sided and stretchable, leave some socks and sweaters poking out from the edges, and other items excluded altogether. Even the seemingly most neutral and least arbitrary of all types of periodization, that defined chronologically by the entirely human-made concepts of centuries (a unit used by late medieval and early modern writers simply to subdivide time, well before its specimens acquired a kind of “period-character”) or decades,⁴⁸ is neither neutral nor devoid of arbitrariness since for much of recent history it has presumed a Judaeo-Christian calendar subsequently imposed on or adopted by the rest of the world. These strict chronological periods aren’t even all that useful in the West, where to “save the phenomena”, we have had to create artificial extensions: Giovanni Arrighi’s “long” vs Eric Hobsbawm’s “short” twentieth centuries (alike the visions of two Marxist scholars),⁴⁹ or the “long” 1970s of Charles S. Maier, for whom the twentieth century “effectively ended between 1973 and 1989.”⁵⁰ The names we give to periods tell us different things, often about more or less the same chunk of chronological years, but apart from any attention to the similarities and relations of objects within the suitcase, they can move and rearrange these objects, culling some and adding others in the process, into different suitcases altogether. As one recent book points out, “the ‘eighteenth century’ and the ‘age of enlightenment’ might refer to roughly the same time span but with very different emphasis.”⁵¹

Periodic names that dispense with the century, decade, or year (we shall leave eons, epochs and millennia to the paleontologists and cosmologists) come with different challenges, however: they predetermine our attitude to their content and our understanding of their meaning. The Middle Ages are only “Middle” if we consider everything before and after them as well, and—at least in the Western tradition since the eighteenth century--superimpose a progressivist story of human civilization. The Enlightenment is only enlightening if, like Voltaire or Condorcet, we start from a presumption that there was a prior state of darkness requiring illumination. And unlike centuries, such names mean different things to different people: to an English literary scholar, “Victorian” means a set of literary

⁴⁸ Though not years or months, which *do* have a roots in nature, as measurable units of time defined by annual revolutions around the sun and daily rotations on earth’s axis. As Louis Menand puts it, there’s nothing in nature that corresponds to a decade, century, millennium, or eon, units that might well have been different if humans had fewer or greater fingers than ten. LOUIS MENAND: Generation Overload, *The New Yorker* 18 October 2021, p. 64.

⁴⁹ The examples of Arrighi and Hobsbawm are specifically mentioned, among others, by Starn, p. 141. For Hobsbawm, 1914 to 1991, the outbreak of World War I to the fall of the Soviet Union seemed in the aftermath of that event to be a meaningful short-century unit, though 30 years of subsequent global conflict has raised doubts about its distinction from the rest of the last chronological century.

⁵⁰ CHARLES S. MAIER: Two Sorts of Crisis? The Long 1970s in the West and the East, in H.G. HOCKERTS (Ed.): *Koordinaten deutscher Geschichte in der Epoche des Ost-West-Konflikts*, Munich 2004, 49-62, at p. 61.

⁵¹ FLORENCE GRANT and LUDMILLA JORDANOVA (Ed.): *Writing Visual Histories*, London - New York 2020, 161.

texts from Carlyle, Macaulay and the Brontes to Hopkins and Hardy, and the cultural currency they reflect, from the mid to late nineteenth century; to a British historian they mean poor laws, industrialization and train travel, empire and liberalism, Reform bills, Darwin and Spencer, or Disraeli and Gladstone, depending on what type of history one does. As for the general public, the adjective is likely simply to sum up a general image of a nineteenth century with somewhat vague chronological boundaries (consider the commonplace error whereby Jane Austen is not infrequently referred to as Victorian despite having died two years before Queen Victoria was even born,) and an association with prudery, corsets, fog, and extreme emotional reserve.⁵²

It's fashionable to dismiss periodization, and it's much easier to find critics than supporters. Many scholars, across several disciplines, appear to feel that periodization's harms outweigh its benefits. The anthropologist Jonathan Friedman, though he does not refer to periodization by name, nonetheless makes it a hallmark of post-Enlightenment Western historicity, whereby history is defined as possessing a singular truth about a unified past consisting of "an arbitrarily chose segment of a temporal continuum ending with the present moment."⁵³ The archaeologist Dan Hicks has disapprovingly renamed our current "Anthropocene" (itself a term of recent vintage and with as many plural meanings and brackets as "early modern") as the "Chronocene", or "an epoch of placing others into other epochs",⁵⁴ by which he means the practice of judging "modernity"—itself a relatively recent concept⁵⁵--by the sole standard of the post-industrial West and deeming the "developing" world as still dwelling in an earlier age, assigned to Dipesh Chakrabarty's "waiting room of history." (This global prejudice is not new, since one finds it in Renaissance anthropology and travel writing, and Enlightenment stadialism). Yet is not this meta-

⁵² Nor is any chronological period-naming neutral. Even something as bland as "nineteenth-century Europe" provides the individual historian with what Blum calls a "time block" which permits a distinctive characterization, unique in its connections and descriptions. HAYDEN WHITE: *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*, Baltimore, 1973, used a "long" nineteenth century (extending from Michelet to Croce), to group together, an octet of historians and philosophers of history in ways that no one else had previously done, as representatives of particular narrative styles held in common by the period. BLUM: *Cognition and Temporality*, 86. However, MARK BEVIR has contended, against this position, that even in the history of ideas it is not realistic to characterize epochs (periods), a stance that at least partially undermines an argument such as the well-known one of Michel Foucault with respect to eras having distinct and unique modes of representation and thought, or "epistemes". MARK BEVIR: *The Logic of the History of Ideas*, Cambridge 1999, 211. Foucault as is reasonably well known, tended to disrupt conventional divisions of history, or at least syncopate across them, in the interest of severing his discursively-constituted, epistemic "conjunctures" from traditional historiography—not always successfully as Starn, 143-44, observes. See also ROGER CHARTIER: *The Chimera of the Origin. Archaeology, Cultural History, and the French Revolution*, in GOLDSTEIN, ed. *Foucault and the Writing of History*, 167-86, at p. 179.

⁵³ JONATHAN FRIEDMAN: *The Past in the Future. History and the Politics of Identity*, *American Anthropologist* 94.4 (1992), 837-59, at p. 850.

⁵⁴ DAN HICKS: *The British Museums. the Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution*, London 2020, 255.

⁵⁵ In the sense of 'most recent', the Latin form *moderna* (for instance *via moderna, ars moderna*) had a medieval and early modern currency, considered as part of what REINHART KOSELLECK called an "additive" chronology; but taken as a distinctive time of new things, *Neuzeit*, he argues that its origins lie in the mid-eighteenth century with thinkers such as Johann Chladenius. KOSELLECK: *The Eighteenth Century and the Beginning of Modernity*, 162.

period in itself a periodization? The implicit teleology of sequential periods, whereby “more modern” succeeds “less modern”, is doubtless a trap to be avoided, and one of which scholars of virtually any temporally-based discipline are deeply aware: in the memorable phrase of music historian Julian Johnson, his own discipline has packaged up the past “in neat bundles as it cuts through the field of the future like some great Hegelian combine-harvester.”⁵⁶ The literary critic Eric Hayot argues against the institutionalization of periods in literary studies, including undergraduate curricula, pointing out that periods tend to get shorter as we approach the present (he means literary-historical periods, but the observation is valid for other types of aesthetic history also) and “that the decreasing size of periods is an effect of chronological narcissism, in which the receding and foreshortened past plays Kansas to our Manhattans.”⁵⁷ Gerald Graff, writing in a collection of essays entitled *On Periodization*, concluded that periodization erases history by obscuring (especially for students stuck within the walls created by curricula) connections or differences between the attitudes of two authors as proximate in time as Jane “not a Victorian!” Austen and George Eliot.⁵⁸ Caroline Levine, in the same volume, comments that “at their best, literary and historical periods look like leaky containers,” though she concedes their practical utility.⁵⁹

Academics of a more social-scientific disposition have, interestingly, often been even harsher than humanists to periodization. Speaking of the privileged status assigned to modernity, and especially western capitalist modernity, Bruno Latour criticizes that particular period-concept for creating and differentiating itself through the essentializing of “an archaic and stable past,” while the anthropologist Johannes Fabian, in his enormously influential 1983 book *Time and the Other*, attacks the forcing of square-peg non-Western cultures into round-hole periods that may be chronologically contemporary but are envisaged as existentially “non-coeval”—essentially stuck in Chakrabarty’s waiting room of history. Western imperial societies, writes Fabian, needed new spaces to occupy but “More profoundly and problematically, they required Time to accommodate the schemes of a one-way history: progress, development, modernity (and their negative mirror images, stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition). In short, *geopolitics* has its ideological foundation in *chronopolitics*.”⁶⁰ Influenced by Fabian, the

⁵⁶ JULIAN JOHNSON: *Out of Time. Music and the Making of Modernity*, Oxford 2015, 7.

⁵⁷ E. HAYOT: *Against Periodization, or, On Institutional Time*, *New Literary History* 42.4 (2011), 739-56.

⁵⁸ GERALD GRAFF: *How Periods Erase History*, *Common Knowledge* 21.2 (2015) 177-83, also in VIRGINIA JACKSON (Ed.): *On Periodization. Selected Essays from the English Institute*, Cambridge, MA 2010, locs 83-101 (online publication at <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.queensu.ca/2027/heb.90047.0001.001>, accessed 2021.04.22).

⁵⁹ CAROLINE LEVINE: *Infrastructuralism, or the Tempo of Institutions*, *ibid.*, loc. 50.

⁶⁰ BRUNO LATOUR: *We have never been modern*, trans. CATHERINE PORTER, Cambridge, MA 1993, 10; DONALD WESLING: *Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, and the Edges of Historical Periods*, *Clio* 26.2 (1997), 189-204; JOHANNES FABIAN: *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Object*, New York 1983, 143-44; KEVIN BIRTH: *The Creation of*

medievalist Kathleen Davis regards the medieval/early modern periodization as a by-product of secularization or, more specifically, the positivist assumption that secularization and progress have marched forward in lockstep, leaving the “theological” Middle Ages behind. It is certainly true that constantly forward-moving modernity inevitably creates and constitutes preceding periods, often in a teleological manner, to signify its departure from the past—this has been true since at least the Renaissance. But this leads Davis to make the somewhat bolder, and in my judgment deeply problematic, assertion that “In an important sense, we cannot periodize the past.”⁶¹ Meanwhile, the environmental historian Poul Houlm, looking at the medieval/early modern transition from the perspective of climate change, big data, and a Braudelian *longue durée*, is troubled by the way in which periods divide academic history departments. Any glance at the jobs listing for the AHA or other national organizations seems to bear out Houlm’s remark that the profession is so segmented that it appears to be “by definition primarily interested in centuries rather than themes or problems.”⁶²

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Chris Lorenz has suggested that there is some conflation among historians (including even Huizinga) between issues of *chronology* and issues of *periodization*, and that while periodization has been of long-standing practical concern to historians it has actually been severely under-theorized.⁶³ Koselleck put this even more bluntly: “history conceived as ubiquitous can only exist as a discipline if it develops a theory of periodization,” without which it risks losing itself in “boundlessly questioning everything.”⁶⁴ I’m inclined to agree in the sense that

Coevalness and the Danger of Homochronism, *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 14.1 (2008), 3-20. See also ALFRED GELL: *The Anthropology of Time. Cultural Constructions of Temporal Maps and Images*, Oxford and Providence, RI 1993; MARK RIFKIN: *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Durham, NC, 2017

⁶¹ KATHLEEN DAVIS: *Periodization and Sovereignty. How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time*, Philadelphia 2008, 8, a point endorsed by Lorenz, *Times*, 117. I could agree more wholeheartedly with Davis’ quoted statement if an adverb such as “permanently” or “stably” were inserted prior to “periodize”. Of course, we can periodize the past and do—what we can’t do is invest any particular periodization with permanence, much less with immanence, that is, with an essence and existence that requires us to characterize developments or actions exclusively in terms of the period to which they belong, and thus slip too easily into the identification of “forerunners” and “anticipations” as well as of “throwbacks”. Davis further suggests (p. 134) that “If the future is to be open, rather than already determined, then periodization must come undone.” Here, too, I would agree that particular periodizations must be undone, reconstructed, and re-dismantled, but that is not the same as suggesting all periodization should be avoided or undone.

⁶² POUL HOLM: *Climate Change, Big Data and the Medieval and Early Modern*, in HUTTON, *Medieval or Early Modern*, 70-84, at p. 70. I do not think, however, that this is quite as commonplace as it was, and in fact there is strong evidence that it has been subverted in the last decade or so by disciplinary refocusing on themes, and on comparative history—but I have not undertaken any kind of systematic analysis of job advertisements or course syllabuses to test my hypothesis.

⁶³ Lorenz, *Times*, 120-24.

⁶⁴ KOSELLECK: *The Need for Theory in History*, trans. K. BEHNKE, in KOSELLECK, *Practice of Conceptual History*, 4. In the emerging subfields of “Big History” and “Deep History”, which integrate paleontology, geology and astronomy, periods have different names and much wider boundaries (thousands and millions of years rather than centuries or decades), but the same logic holds, even in the wake of highly accurate dating techniques such as radiometry. See ANDREW SHRYOCK, DANIEL LORD SMAIL: *Deep History. The Architecture of Past and Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2011, p. xv. See also

there is relatively little literature on the logic, criteria, and minimal requirements of any decision to declare something a “period,” at least compared with the great deal of writing about the legitimacy of this or that particular periodization scheme. I’d like to conclude with a brief exploration of both *Periodisierung* (a periodization, a noun, the product of a thought process that reflects on and constructs periods) and *periodisieren* (periodizing—an action, the process of thinking through periods that leads to different periodizations). I suggest both that they are not the same thing (though they are routinely conflated, at least in English), and that while the noun is dispensable and ephemeral, the verb or action is not. So as not to be misunderstood, let me restate that I entirely agree with Le Goff, Davis, and many others that periods can and do distort our view of the past, but then so do many other things: availability or selection of evidence; archival decisions with respect to what to keep and what to discard, personal agendas or fixations on particular topics, outright scholarly mendacity, and the quotidian politics of the academy. Periodization’s sins seem rather modest in comparison with some of these. If periods do distort, they do so only by becoming too rigid and inflexible, and outstaying their welcomes, and forcing ridiculously arbitrary slot-filling and trivial arguments over chronological quotation marks such as whether Richard III or Henry VII was the last medieval king of England. Worse still, periods have always been in danger of reification: rather than arbitrary mental constructs designed to organize the past, moveable shelves from top to bottom on to which events and personalities can be loaded, they become essentialized, ontologized, and immovable boxes (or suitcases if you prefer the earlier metaphor) whose very rigidity constrains the meaning of events—unless we tear up the boxes and reassemble them in a different shape and size. Like children playing with the literal cardboard box their Christmas toy came in rather than the toy itself, we can obsess about just “how medieval” this or that piece of art or music is, or whether this bureaucratic reform or technological innovation bears the marks of early modernity and thus perhaps should be put in a different box.

But here’s the thing: our periodization-scepticism has mistakenly fixated on *periods* themselves rather than on the process of *periodizing* whereby they are imagined, constructed, and applied. I’ll use a military analogy to illustrate the difference. A remark attributed to Helmuth von Moltke the elder in the nineteenth century, but reflecting beliefs of much older provenance, is “No plan ever survived first contact with the enemy”. General Eisenhower reformulated this as “Plans are useless, Planning Essential”, and José Saramago yet again as “On paper, all plans seem more or less feasible, however reality has shown its irresistible urge to deviate from what is written

on the page and to tear up all plans.”⁶⁵ For plans and planning respectively let’s substitute “periods” and “periodizing”. Periods aren’t useless, but they almost immediately run into difficulty when they come up against the constantly evolving interpretation of history, which on the whole doesn’t like being put into boxes. As Penelope Corfield has put it, “old labels and key dates for change regularly become outworn, especially as the accumulating evidence of history changes perspectives upon the past.”⁶⁶ Periods are thus best seen as disposable, heuristic devices which must be revisited, changed and even ruthlessly abandoned if they cease to provide new insight and instead become constraints. But we do need containers in their place—if our boxes, or vases, or shelves, are broken, and no longer serve a useful purpose, then we routinely toss them out, but we don’t simply start throwing our belongings into disorganized, chaotic piles. The mid-sixteenth century French jurist and historical theorist Jean Bodin was saying precisely this in his 1566 *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* when he called for the abandonment of what had for a millennium been an old reliable division of time, derived from the Prophet Daniel and the book of Revelations, among the “four empires”, because the Prophecy of Daniel (whence it derived) could be interpreted in many different ways, because there seemed to Bodin to have been many more empires than four, and because the definition of “empire” by the scheme’s adherents was uselessly vague. He had similar scorn for another type of period, that of the “golden age”. But he did not call for the complete elimination of temporal divisions of the past, and indeed immediately followed these denunciations with a chapter on chronology, since “those who think they can understand histories without chronology are as much in error as those who wish to escape the windings of a labyrinth without a guide....[W]ithout a system of time hardly any advantage is culled from history.”⁶⁷

Periodizing, re-periodizing, and re-re-periodizing is, therefore, a historiographical equivalent of planning, and it is dependent on our imposition of brackets that demarcate a period: every time we set and re-set our bracketing events, we see different things, different causal connections, potential analogies, and so on. I’ll switch metaphors one more time, from the martial to the musical. In sequencing and grouping events so that they make sense, periods fulfill the same function that bar lines provide in music, and the beginnings and ends of periods have a counterpart in the place of tonic notes in determining musical modes and chords. Like bars, key changes, and modes, the shifting of which changes our perception of the same notes, our bracketings of the events of the past

⁶⁵ JOSÉ SARAMAGO: *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, trans. Giovanni Pontiero, San Diego, New York and London 1996. (An even more famous version comes from an esteemed contemporary political philosopher, Mr Mike Tyson: everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.)

⁶⁶ PENELOPE J. CORFIELD: *Time and the Shape of History*, New Haven, CT - London, 2007, 124.

⁶⁷ JEAN BODIN: *Method for the Easy Comprehension of History*, trans. BEATRICE REYNOLDS, New York 1945, 291-302, 303-33.

should not have permanence, and therein lies the risk. There are many notorious cases of misunderstanding that a bracketing or periodization applicable in one situation isn't necessarily transferable.⁶⁸ Scholars of non-Western history are especially aware of this, as the imposition of European, and usually imperialist period labels and boundaries which diminish or marginalize indigenous, Asian or African achievements, once again placing them in history's waiting room.

Let's go further. Our dependency on the mental act of periodizing is not one of history's "bugs" but rather a core "feature". Periodizing is precisely what permits us to draw connections between discrete events, to understand where they begin and end, and then to re-sort the sequence in a different way to see these connections differently. There are ethical and ideological as well as narrative implications for this as different starts and finishes surround events with different contexts and varying possible interpretations of their meaning. We could not do any of this without periodizing, and without the ability to slice and re-sort the periods we construct repeatedly, and in so doing rethink the meaning, influence, and transitional significance of key events.⁶⁹ If, for instance, the story of the "rise" of the West begins in the sixteenth century, as has been traditional in Euro-American historiography and even in the first wave of world history in the 1960s and 70s, then its achievement of global hegemony in ensuing centuries looks like the consequence of specifically European initiatives and qualities. As Janet Abu-Lugod suggested over three decades ago, however, where a period starts is often determined by the ending or result that we wish to explain. If one looks a bit further back, as well as wider geographically, then Europe's "rise" can look less inevitable and more like an accidental occurrence enabled by the decline of more powerful and sophisticated Asian regimes and their trading systems to which, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, entrepreneurial Europeans had wisely attached themselves and from which they learned.⁷⁰ Only by re-periodization can we reimagine how the past unfolded and why things happened in the way they did. To quote Fredric Jameson again—who himself offers multiple possible

⁶⁸ For instance the error made by advocates of military intervention in Vietnam who failed to see that the situation of the US in 1965 was much more akin to that of France in 1951 than in 1955; they essentially put a bracket in the wrong place, leading to a feeling that it was safe to escalate involvement. Stories can provide useful models or analogies for present action, but where they begin and end—that is, their bracketing, is crucial to the lessons that they can provide: RICHARD E. NEUSTADT, ERNEST R. MAY: *Thinking in Time. The Uses of History for Decision Makers*, London 1986, 83, 106-7, 133.

⁶⁹ As for instance done by sequential Chinese regimes, imperial, republican, Maoist and post-Maoist in successive repositionings (and renamings) of the nineteenth-century Opium Wars, such periodizations having been superfluous in the non-linear temporality of Confucian-imperial historiography: LUKE S.K. KWONG: *The Rise of the Linear Perspective on History and Time in Late Qing China c. 1860-1911, Past and Present* 173 (2001), 157-90 at p. 173, 185.

⁷⁰ JANET ABU-LUGHOD: *On the Remaking of History. How to Reinvent the Past*, in BARBARA KRUGER, PHIL MARIANI (Ed.): *Remaking History*, Seattle 1989, 111-29.

dates for the commencement of modernity, from the age of Martin Luther to that of Martin Luther King—where we start and end the story invariably opens up “alternative story-telling possibilities.”⁷¹

Following from this, I would argue that if we view periods not as a necessary evil, deployed simply to make sense of events and tell a story, one that must be carefully guarded against for all the reasons Le Goff and others have discussed, but rather as an essential tool for the conferral of meaning on the past, then the merits of periodizing become clearer. Or perhaps I should say, the merits of periodizing, re-periodizing and re-re-periodizing in a continuous and unending process become manifest, as do the similar practices of subdividing periods, overlapping them, combining and recombining them. I am not at all suggesting that, at least within the sheltered confines of academic historiography,⁷² common sense be thrown out the window and that we declare the airplane an invention of the late Middle Ages, nor that we dispense with accepted linear chronology as a mere social construction and claim that there is no reason to believe that the Emperor Charles V came before rather than after Frederick Barbarossa. What I am suggesting is that every time we place events in relation to other events in the same or a different period, we are telling a different story, constructing different relations of cause and effect, and seeing different facets of the past. Clearly, it’s not merely where we put the markers between periods that matters, but the size of the periods as a whole, and how the transition from one period to another is interpreted.⁷³ So far as the first of these is concerned, the *Annalists* saw the importance of scale many decades ago, and Fernand Braudel in particular taught us that a single event or set of events (the Battle of Lepanto, the execution of Louis XVI, or the entire French Revolution) may look slow and significant within the detailed scale of *l’histoire événementielle*, but seems much faster, a mere firefly blip, when de-focused against the landscape of the *longue durée*. “Big” historians such as Fred Spier and David Christian have gone even further, reminding us that the entirety of human history is but a microsecond of time in the story of the universe. In truth, most historians will at one occasion or another apply different scales to the past, examining it with the telescope fully extended or pulled back for a wider view. It’s precisely the failure to do so that occasions a loss of perspective and a failure to recognize multiple contexts and causal relationships that can extend over short, medium, and longer terms. So far as the second—what we might call

⁷¹ JAMESON, *A Singular Modernity*, 31-32.

⁷² This qualifying clause is necessary because we also need to remain aware that while chronicity is a feature of many historical cultures, it is not universal; consider the place-based senses of the past of contemporary indigenous populations or of pre-literate and semi-literate societies who contained their past in stories and episodes for whom where is more important than when. On this see MARNIE HUGHES-WARRINGTON, ANNE MARTIN: *Big and Little Histories. Sizing up Ethics in Historiography*, London 2021, especially chapter 10. I am grateful to the authors for allowing me to read this book in advance of publication.

⁷³ SEBOUH DAVID ASLANIAN, JOYCE CHAPLIN, ANN MCGRATH, and KRISTIN MANN: *How Size Matters. The Question of Scale in History*, *American Historical Review*, 118.5 (2013), 1430-72.

inter-epochal transition, it can be represented either as a smooth and seamless set of overlapping changes and continuities—like the ship which is serially rebuilt plank by plank—or as a sudden and abrupt change effected by war or revolution. Thus the different views of the progress of mankind of Condorcet and Robespierre during the French Revolution, the former narrating in his *Esquisse* a smooth upward progression of civilization from era to era while his Jacobin counterpart, in a speech given to the Convention a few weeks before his own fall, highlighted the roughness of such transitions and the failure of moral progress to keep pace with technological improvement.⁷⁴

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In conclusion, I have suggested here that while challenges to period boundaries and to period characterization are entirely legitimate, that question has been confused with the very different issue of the heuristic function of periodization in historical thought. Periodization is both inescapable and indispensable. We should take due note of warnings against fixating on periods, which are “neither absolute nor phantasmatic”, but that should not prevent us from either continuously rethinking their characteristics or repeatedly shifting their boundaries which, like those literal frontiers that often only vaguely marked the limits of medieval and early modern principalities and kingdoms, exist as guideposts to be challenged and perpetually renegotiated, but without which travelers would quickly have found themselves lost in alien terrain.

⁷⁴ DAN EDELSTEIN: Future Perfect. Political and Emotional Economies of Revolutionary Time, in DAN EDELSTEIN, STEFANOS GEROULANOS, NATASHA WHEATLEY (Ed.): Power and Time. Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History, Chicago 2020, 357-378 at p. 361.